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ON POETRY

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By

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ON POETRY

THE honour which the University has done me in electing me to the Chair of Poetry is deepened for me by the memory of what I owe to my predecessors. Looking back to my school days, more than forty years ago, I recall the reading of *Culture and Anarchy* as a clear stage in my mental growth, whilst *The Scholar Gipsy* and the Preface to the *Essays in Criticism* prepared me to appreciate that strange beauty which is not the least precious of the gifts that Oxford lavishes on her sons, a gift that cannot, in these days, be too jealously preserved. To me as to so many others, *The Golden Treasury* was a revelation of the incomparable range and splendour of English lyric poetry, and Palgrave's lectures on Spenser, which I attended, a solitary and painfully conspicuous undergraduate in a select elderly audience, were the first discourses on literature I listened to. To Professor Bradley I owe a debt still deeper, and not only for the inspiration gained from contact with his rich and beautiful mind. When he was appointed to this Chair, the Honours School of English, in which I was a teacher, was in its infancy: with the linguistic studies in the hands of that great and learned scholar Professor Napier, and no one to give an equal prestige to the study of literature, the scales were heavily weighted against the humarer side of the curriculum. But Professor Bradley came to our aid; with the special object of helping the English School he voluntarily extended the scope of his office, and by delivering those lectures upon Shakespeare and Wordsworth, the like of which had not been heard since the days of Coleridge, he convinced a somewhat incredulous University that English poetry was worthy of a place among academic studies, and thus prepared the ground for a work so happily consolidated under the guid-

ance of Sir Walter Raleigh, Professor Nichol Smith, and the President of Magdalen. As I call these things to mind, and remember, too, my many obligations to those who have held this Chair during the last twenty years, I may well doubt my competence to 'follow in the footing of their feet'. For each of them, in his own way, and by his own individual method of approach, has upheld the claims of poetry to its place among the highest achievements of the human mind.

The abiding value of poetry is attested by the persistence with which generation after generation has attacked, defended, and discussed it.¹ The Greeks, with their unrivalled sense of beauty and their piercing intelligence, might well have revealed, once for all, its essential nature; but their faith in reason as the sole avenue to truth forced them to distrust that incalculable element in it, which, according to their mood, they called either madness or inspiration. Plato expelled the poet from his Republic and himself assumed the poetic function; but although, when he wrote his myths, the poet within him gave the lie to the philosopher, his explicit doctrine darkened understanding for centuries after him. Despite Aristotle's recognition that poetry was creative of an ideal world of which the distinctive qualities were rhythm and an organic unity, much of his criticism was in reality an attempt to justify poetry rather than to define it; despite that flash of insight which led Longinus to speak of the effect of poetry as not pleasure but transport, and of words as the 'very light of the spirit', criticism tended to concentrate upon the didactic uses of poetry: its essential character was either taken for granted or misunderstood. The rationalist and the moralist were always at hand, insisting that poetry was only a means to an end outside itself; and the poet was more than half converted. Spenser, indeed, confident in the unity of truth and beauty, could safely accept the moral interpretation of his art:

For of the soul the body form doth take,
For soul is form, and doth the body make;

but only incidentally does Sidney refer, in his eloquent *Apologie for Poetrie* against its detractors, to 'that exquisite observing of number and measure in words, and that high flying liberty of conceit proper to the poet, (which) did seem to have some divine force in it'; If the poets felt, with Milton, that they were truly inspired with a passion for the good and fair, they felt, with Milton also, that they had a divine message to the world, and gratefully accepted their role as 'mirrors of fructuous entendement'. Nor did poetry suffer any harm thereby. The danger only arose when the rationalistic spirit grew stronger than the creative impulse, and a fatal distinction was drawn between the content of a poem and its form, so that form came to be regarded not as inevitable expression, but merely as a pleasurable decoration of the subject matter, a concession to that weakness inherent in man, by which he will listen more readily to the voice of reason if she appear before him tricked out in all the finery of fancy. From this heresy it was a clear logical deduction that such themes as need no extraneous ornament are unsuited for poetic treatment. 'Poetry', says Dr. Johnson, 'loses its lustre and its power applied to the decoration of something more excellent than itself. . . . In sacred poetry who has succeeded?' He forgot the *Psalms*; and he forgot too those moving lines which bring to a close his own *Vanity of Human Wishes*.

The true relation of reason to inspiration in poetry, and of substance to form, was first convincingly set forth by Dr. Johnson's successors. Poetry to them was simply the expression of the imagination, and the poetic imagination only; another name

For clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And reason in her most exalted mood;

they held the poet to be one who sees into the world of human experience with clear and comprehensive vision; the passion which stirs to life his creative instinct does not distort the truth, but reveals it; whilst his function is to communicate neither knowledge nor moral instruction, but power.

But man is an incorrigible moralist; and the finest critic among the Victorians, for all his rare perception of the greatest poetry, and of its power by a magical felicity of language, to awaken in us 'a full, new, and intimate sense of things and their relations', could not escape the bias of his age. Setting up as the crucial test of poetry its application of ideas to life, he found Chaucer wanting in high seriousness, judged that Wordsworth would have been a better poet if he had read more books, and loftily dismissed Shelley as an ineffectual angel. What wonder, then, that some lovers of poetry, in exasperated revulsion from an attitude that bore no likeness to their own experience in reading Chaucer, or Wordsworth, or Shelley, retorted on a doctrine which seemed unduly to exalt content over form by claiming for form a value wholly independent of content? The peculiar emotion that poetry excites can, they urged, be felt with only an imperfect understanding of its meaning; a child can have it; we can have it by hearing poetry read to us in a foreign language, or by catching a beautiful line out of its context. Obviously, then, the poetic element in poetry lies in its music. It cannot be pure music, because its employs words which are primarily intellectual symbols, but it does its best to free itself from their encumbrance; at least it aspires to the condition of music, and it succeeds in so far as it attains its aspiration. Thus, distorting Pater's memorable phrase, they developed the theory that poetry works upon us by a kind of musical incantation with which the rational side of our nature has little concern.]

But we can do full justice to the music of poetry without so uncompromising a disregard of its subject matter. Indeed,

the vital distinction between music and poetry lies just here, that whilst music enchant^s us by pure sound, the transport^t of poetry springs from the effect upon us of sound with a clearly defined intellectual content, so perfectly fused with it that we cannot distinguish sound from sense or sense from sound. To hear a poem read in a foreign language may excite an agreeable sensation, but that is partly because the human voice is itself the most lovely of musical instruments, partly because the poem can only be read to us by one who himself understands it, and hence by sympathy with him we catch some faint suggestion of its meaning; but even so the pleasure is different in kind from that which we gain from hearing a poem that we understand. Poetry in a foreign tongue is, in fact, not poetry to us, but music. If the essence of poetry lay in its music we should value poets chiefly for their metrical and melodic accomplishment, whereas nothing is more tedious in poetry than a music that has no meaning. If Spenser's exquisite melody has been the delight of all our greatest poets, it is because through that melody he is always presenting something that is in itself worth while, now a picture, now a delicate moral reflection, always some facet of his beautiful poetic self; whereas Swinburne, with a far greater melodic range, often irritates with mere virtuosity. That words have an intellectual significance from which the poet cannot escape is no disadvantage to poetry, it is simply the condition over which it triumphs; and the effect of the poet's music, as music, cannot be dissociated from its meaning. It is true, indeed, that lines can be found which haunt the ear with their melody:

And sweet, reluctant, amorous delay

Of Abbana and Pharpar, lucid streams

And on a sudden, lo! the level lake

And the long glories of the winter moon,

though I doubt whether even here the melodic effect does not move us in proportion as we enter into the poet's thought, and accept it as worth the carriage. Would those lines upon the daffodils,

'That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty,

affect us even musically if we did not know what a swallow or what a daffodil was? But the authentic thrill of poetry is often gained from lines that make no special melodic appeal:

I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness
I never gave you kingdoms, called you daughters.

Since there 's no help, come let us kiss and part
And never lifted up a single stone.

The musical effect of these lines is almost nugatory, yet no one familiar with their context can doubt their supreme poetic effect. And the true poet, where his melody is most haunting, does not aim at lulling the intellect to sleep in a kind of sensuous enchantment, but rather at kindling our whole nature, so that we become intensely aware of things and their relations.

This conception of 'pure' poetry as it is called has, in its crudest form, had little vogue in this country, but it plays an important part in all those theories which find the essence of poetry in its power to induce a kind of dream consciousness or transcendental feeling. Professor Stewart, with that persuasive charm that was natural to him, so employed it in his *Myths of Plato*, and it was a corner-stone of that brilliant argument with which some three years ago M. L'Abbé Bremond, one of the most eminent of our own Honorary Doctors, startled the French Academy. M. Bremond accepts the view that poetry is a kind of music, and that to appreciate it a full understanding of its intellectual content is not suffi-

cient or even necessary. Poetry, he holds, has an obscure enchantment independent of its sense; it is an incantation which gives unconscious expression to the poet's state of soul, and in turn reveals that state of soul to us. The poet's words, indeed, act as a kind of electric current passing from his under-consciousness to ours, so that we share with him a confused experience, inaccessible to distinct consciousness. And herein lies the essential difference between poetry and prose, that while prose excites our ordinary activities, poetry suspends them. Poetry, therefore, in its essence, 'pure' poetry, is a mystic magic allied not to music but to prayer.

Before the audience to which this subtle and eloquent address was delivered its climax, *la prière*, was a splendid audacity, and it raised the storm that it was clearly intended to provoke. But while, if I had to choose between M. Bremond and his rationalist opponents, I should not hesitate, it is possible, I think, to hold as firm a faith in the spiritual value of poetry, and to admit the affinity of much poetry with mystical experience, without making that experience the touchstone which differentiates it from prose. For surely any human experience, if it be passionately felt and clearly imagined, can take its place in the ideal world of poetry. The Palace of Art has many apartments besides that lonely chamber in which the prophet communes with the stars, and the surest way of reaching the upper regions, and fitting ourselves to be their tenant, is to pass through the lower. It is significant that those two of our poets whose attitude to life is most profoundly mystical do not countenance this austere exclusiveness. Which of our writers is less of a mystic than Chaucer, who was hailed by the pioneer of a rationalistic age as 'the perpetual fountain of good sense'? Yet Blake sees in Chaucer 'the great poetical observer of men', and in his pilgrims 'visions of the eternal principles or characters of

human life, as they appeal to poets of all ages'; whilst Wordsworth, who is often charged with caring for no verses but his own, acclaimed as true poetry alike the 'convivial exaltation' of Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*, and the careless gaiety of Suckling's *Ballad on a Wedding*. You remember Suckling's delicious description of the bride:

Her feet beneath her petticoat
Like little mice stole in and out
As if they feared the light;
But o! she dances such a way
No sun upon an Easter day
Is half so fine a sight!

When Wordsworth came to this stanza he noted, with pardonable exaggeration, in the margin of his copy, 'for grace and simplicity this stands unrivalled in the whole compass of ancient and modern poetry.' Indeed, the peculiar difficulty of the poet's art, that language, which is his medium, is normally an ill-used household drudge, brings with it this supreme compensation, that to him alone of all artists the whole of human experience is material, awaiting his creative energy. Nothing human is foreign to him, provided that he can re-live it himself and feel it upon his own pulse. He is no less true to his poetic instinct when he fleets the time carelessly, as in the golden world, than when he probes the mysteries of existence, as if he were God's spy. He is no less a poet when he 'enjoys delight with liberty', as he watches the butterfly among the flowers:

now sucking of the sap of herb most meete
or of the dew, which yet on them doth lie,
now in the same bathing his tender feete,

than when he is wrapt in contemplation of our first parents in the garden of Eden; he can enter as whole-heartedly into Oberon's frenzy at the gallantries of Pigwiggen as into Othello's tragic passion; and the ecstasy of Romeo beneath

| Juliet's balcony is hardly more to him than a lover's rhapsody
over his lady's costly apparel:

Whenas in silks my Julia goes
Ah, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
The liquefaction of her clothes!

In conventional society he is at home as in nature's remotest solitudes. He is with Belinda playing cards at Hampton Court,

Let spades be trumps, she said, and trumps they were,
and with Don Juan at the country seat

Of Lord Amundeville and Lady A.

'You have so many divine poems,' wrote Byron in his own defence, 'is it nothing to have written a human one?' And just as poetry can express the subtlest and deepest thoughts that enter into the mind of man, provided that they have passed through the crucible of passion, can even voice that artistically unpopular thing a great moral truth, so can it utter sheer nonsense, provided that the nonsense does not pretend to be other than it is, and that it conveys an irresponsible gaiety of heart. Nay, further, poetry can remain poetry when it is parodying itself. Swinburne mocking his own virtuosity is really more poetic than in some of that verse which for all its mellifluousness is empty of meaning; for here, at least, there is a genuine emotion, the delight of getting outside himself and revelling in his own absurdities.

| It is surely an error to deny to all this the name of poetry because it does not induce transcendental feeling.

And further, while we cannot thus limit the subject matter of poetry, neither can we accept that mystical view of the poet's use of language which marks it off so sharply from our own, and makes into a difference of kind what is, perhaps, only a difference in degree. Our speech in ordinary life is as near as we can get it to what we mean: what the poet

communicates in his poem is just what the poem says, and not some mystical state of soul which comes through the medium of his poem, above or apart from its meaning. The poet brings his imagination to bear upon his experience, and the breath of his passion

winnows the light away
And what hath mass and matter, by itself
Lies rich in virtue and unmixed.

This mass takes artistic shape in his mind as he finds the just and only words for its expression, and those words have a beauty of imagery and rhythm simply because his subject, which is not an abstract proposition or a commonplace, but a living experience transmuted by imagination, can by its very nature only find voice in terms of beauty. It is true that he cannot explain this process to himself, that the subject seems to take control of him rather than he of it; but after all that is not a state of things peculiar to the poet. All our happiest thoughts and actions spring spontaneously from us, without our being able to give a reasonable account of their origin: we only know that some power within us instinctively prompted them. This is, indeed, a miracle in our constitution as human beings, but it is no more a miracle than our power of thought or of movement; it is an element in the supreme miracle of life. And the poet, by a command of language approximate to his power of vision, shares with us his imaginative experience. But what some critics regard as magic in his use of words is really only an extension of the natural power inherent in language. I spoke earlier of words as intellectual symbols, and they are, indeed, nothing else so long as they are imprisoned in the dictionary; but as soon as they escape into a living sentence, they gain individuality from the speaker's voice and the expression upon his face, and catch subtle shades of meaning which no dictionary can define, a meaning not purely intellectual, and capable of infinite

variation according to the genius of him that uses them. We say that such language suggests more than it expresses; but it would be equally accurate to say that it expresses just what it suggests. If, then, the poet's words convey to us a transcendental feeling, over and above their logical significance, it is because the poet had that feeling and consciously expressed it. He may not be able to explain the source of his inspiration, nor how the words came to him in which he shapes it, but when the words have come he knows what he means by them, and he is satisfied with them in proportion as they correspond with his meaning. I feel, therefore, that phrases such as 'obscure enchantment independent of the actual meaning', or 'incantation giving unconscious expression to a state of soul' do not help us to understand even that mystical poetry to which alone they could be applicable. The analogy between much of the highest poetry and religion is clear enough in the doctrine of the poetic imagination; but we learn more, as it seems to me, of the distinctive character of both poet and mystic if we contrast rather than seek to identify them. To the mystic, experience is an end in itself; his sole desire is to become merged in that divine life of which he is sublimely conscious. But what matters to the poet, as a poet, is not so much his experience as what he can create from it. He feels that

if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not,

and he attests the divinity within him not by surrendering his personality, but by asserting the divine impulse to creation.

M. Bremond admits this, and sets down the poet as a mystic *manqué*; but surely that is to condemn him by the laws of a country not his own. The poet's business, whatever the nature of his experience, is to hand it on to others; and this he does by bringing to bear upon it all his powers to

'clarify and define. For the secret of art, as Blake saw, is definiteness.

To see a world in a grain of sand
 And a heaven in a wild flower;
 Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
 And eternity in an hour;

no stanza in our poetry has more mystical depth than this; yet here is no 'obscure enchantment', no 'unconscious expression of a state of soul', but a beautifully clear statement of recognizable spiritual experience. If we want 'obscure enchantment' we shall find it in Blake's *Prophetic Books*, which are seldom poetry.

From all of which we conclude that if we would discover that abstraction 'pure' poetry, i.e. the essentially poetic quality in a poem, we must seek it not in an alliance with music, nor in an alliance with prayer, but in the perfect rightness of its language to convey a passionately felt experience. The transport, as Longinus justly calls it, that the poet kindles in us springs from our instinctive recognition that his form, a term that includes both rhythm and diction, is an entirely faithful rendering of his experience, so that we gain from it a sudden clear sense of fulfilment, such as we can hardly hope to gain outside the ideal world of art. And the profounder the experience, provided that its form is adequate, the greater the poetic transport. But we can gain it without approaching to a mystical state, and if it is allied to prayer it is in the sense in which Fra Lippo Lippi met the Prior's complaint that his Madonnas did not instigate to devotion:

If you get simple beauty and nought else
 You get about the best thing God invents:
 That's somewhat; and you'll find the soul you've missed
 Within yourself, when you return him thanks.

Moreover, it is in the poet's struggle to find adequate expression for his experience that his experience acquires its true

value, even for himself. Until he does this, all is confused and shapeless; power over language brings with it clarity of vision. Only when the stream is pellucid can the poet see into its depths. In a sense he hardly knows his subject till his poem is written; the character of Hamlet was not clearly defined, even for Shakespeare, before the play was complete, Milton's conception of Satan grew in strength and complexity as *Paradise Lost* took shape beneath his hands. Poetic inspiration lies less in the initial experience than in the creative act of translating it into fitting words. Shelley may seem to deny this. 'The mind in creation', he says, 'is as a fading coal; when composition begins inspiration is already on the decline; and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably but a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet.' But this means no more than that the poet's world is inexhaustible in its beauty and resources, so that there will always hover o'er his restless head

One thought, one grace, one wonder at the least
Which into words no virtue can digest.

Art is emotion recollected in tranquillity, and re-lived imaginatively in an ideal atmosphere, wherein, if there is less heat, there is more light. The spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings in which it originates is itself too turbulent to find poetic form; it supplies at first no more than rough material from which the precise perfect record is yet to be created. This is a truth that dawned on Wordsworth at the time when he had just come into his poetic heritage, and when, as his sister tells us, his ideas were flowing faster than he could express them; and he jotted it down in a fragment of verse, found recently among his note-books:

nor had my voice
Been silent often times, had I burst forth
In verse which, with a strong and random light

Touching an object in its prominent parts,
 Created a memorial which to me
 Was all sufficient, and to my own mind
 Recalling the whole picture, seemed to speak
 An universal language. Scattering thus
 In passion many a desultory sound,
 I deemed that I had adequately clothed
 Meanings at which I hardly hinted, thought
 And forms of which I scarcely had produced
 An arbitrary sign. . . .

rough notes, one might say, enough to enable the poet to 'recollect' his own emotion, but not an universal language, not poetry, because it was still formless. But the poet's art, he goes on, does not lie in these random effusions, but

In that considerate and laborious work,
 That patience which, admitting no neglect,
 By slow creation doth impart to speech
 Outline and substance even, till it has given
 A function kindred to organic power,
 · The vital spirit of a perfect form.

To give to impassioned experience that perfect form by which alone it can live on the lips and in the hearts of men, to give it *life by means of form*, that is the creative act of the poet. And it is, says Wordsworth, speaking naturally from his own experience, a slow and toilsome business. The poem does not spring from the poet's brain, like Minerva from the head of Jove; it comes gradually by a process that to his impetuous nature is often irksome and laborious. The extent of the labour varies with the genius of the poet and with his mood, but it is always greater than is implied in the common view of poetic inspiration. Wordsworth, as we know, found the effort to achieve equivalence of phrase and feeling far more exhausting to body and spirit than the earlier stages of composition, and in the end had often to admit defeat; whilst greater masters of language than he fall continually

below themselves, either through a careless confidence in their own facility, or through reluctance to take those pains which are indispensable to poetic genius. Thus it was with Shakespeare; his friends, the players, might think it an honour to him that he never blotted a line, but Ben Jonson justly 'lamented their ignorance who chose that circumstance to commend their friend by wherein he most faulted'. To Shelley, too, it came easily; hence the number of fragments that he has left, desultory sounds scattered in passion we might call them, which would have become poems had he the patience to complete them. Others, genuine poets, fail because they will not submit to that discipline which artistic creation demands. Thus it was that Collins, as Professor Garrod in a penetrating study has lately shown us, rarely secures that finality which his noble dirge and his exquisite *Ode to Evening* convince us to have been within his reach. And if we would gain insight into the process of poetic creation, we can do no better than study, where the material is available, the many changes through which the text of a poem passes, either before or after its first publication, and note what Keats has called the 'innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling, delicate, and snailhorn perception of beauty' which will satisfy its creator. If ever there was a poet to whom faultless expression seems to come without effort it is the Milton of *Comus* and *Lycidas*, yet a glance at his manuscript reveals how carefully he worked, rejecting lines in themselves without a flaw, if they seemed otiose, discarding here and there words whose adequacy we should not question, had we not the last consummate phrase with which to compare them. Thus the lovely

'And every flower that sad embroidery wears!
is only reached after the rejection of the less musical 'sad

escutcheon', whilst a line with which any poet might rest content—

, And airy tongues that lure night wanderers)

is so altered that it takes us to the very heart of romance:

And airy tongues that syllable men's names.

Similarly Keats, to whom poetry came like leaves to a tree, and who before his death could almost rival the ripe felicity of Milton, only gained it by the same process of scrupulous refinement. All of which helps us to realize that the inspiration of a poem depends on a perfection of form in which every phrase and cadence bears a significant part. A single false note may ruin the harmony of a stanza. There is one of Landor's charming epigrams in which a fatal flaw was only healed years after its publication, when the poet, re-living the experience which had prompted it, gave it the one thing needful:

The place where soon I think to lie
In its old creviced nook hard by
 Rears many a weed;
If chance may bring you there, will you
Drop slily in a grain or two
 Of wall-flower seed?

I shall not see it, and (too sure!)
I shall not ever hear that your
 Light step was there;
But the rich odour some fine day
Will, what I cannot do, repay
 That little care.

So the poem runs in a copy corrected in Landor's own writing; but for the phrase in the fourth line 'If chance may bring you there', all printed versions read 'If parties bring you there'. Parties! The suggestion is not of a friend drawn by some impulse she cannot explain to the grave of a once loved poet, but of personally conducted tours round Florence,

'putting in' the cemetery between visits to the Duomo and the Uffizi. With that one vile word the spirit of the poem evaporates.

But where the poet has attained to this perfect union of form and idea, though we recognize it by the power it has to move us, we cannot explain it, for therein lies the mystery of poetry.¹ An exquisite feeling for words, for their associations, for their music, for their imaginative suggestion, have, we know, helped the poet to achieve it, but there is no sovereign rule to guide him, save sincerity to his vision; each poetic experience is unique and demands its own unique mode of utterance. Sometimes the crowning effect is gained by a fine extravagance, as in the cry of Iachimo, overcome by Imogen's matchless beauty,

'Tis her breathing that
Perfumes the chamber thus; the flame of the taper
Bows toward her;

Common sense might otherwise explain the flicker of a taper, and Ruskin would assure us that we have here a pathetic fallacy, yet surely Hazlitt is right in saying that 'this passionate interpretation of the motion of the flame to accord with the speaker's feelings is true poetry'. Sometimes an equally telling effect is gained by deliberate understatement, as in that superb final speech of Othello:

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate
Speak of me as I am; then you shall speak
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme.

What hyperbole of phrase could so poignantly bring home to our hearts the awful wreckage of Othello's life, and his agony of soul, as this ironic use of two well-nigh colourless words, 'unlucky' and 'perplexed'? Sometimes the poet attunes us to his emotion by putting before us images which are in themselves of the rarest beauty, or by evoking the

rich resource of musical suggestion, or of reminiscence far sought in history or romance,

Aspramont or Montalban,
Damasco, or Maroco, or Trebisond;

at other times he will draw his analogies from our daily traffic with the world, raising the most mundane pursuits to the level of poetry. What calling is more remote from the imaginative life than the law? Yet Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are crowded with legal metaphor:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,

Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming of things to come
Can yet the lease of my true love control
Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom.

These legal terms recur so often in the *Sonnets*, that when I speculate, as we all do, upon the identity of Shakespeare's friend, I am tempted to think that he must have been a lawyer; for in no way can we more subtly suggest our intimacy with one we love than by using language which to him has special significance. But this use of prosaic allusion needs such tact that none but the finest artists are safe with it. Vaughan, a great poet but uncertain artist, mars his sketch of a sunrise with the phrase 'Stars shut up shop'; yet Milton can employ the same homely metaphor with tender and delicate feeling:

And set to work millions of spinning worms
That in their green shops weave the smooth haired silk.

But some of the greatest poetry is bare of either simile or metaphor, piercing the heart by that strange spell that lies in utter simplicity. Where does the pathos of frustrated love find more plangent voice than in those few lines which fall from the lips of Troilus, when he sees on Diomed's coat the broach that he had given to Crisseyde?

Through which I see that clene out of your minde
 Ye han me cast, and I ne can nor may
 For all this world, within myn herte finde
 To unloven you a quarter of a day!

'A quarter of a day'; why a quarter? you may ask.' So Keats, viewing for a moment with playful detachment his own tragic passion in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, comments on the line *With kisses four*, 'why four?' And there is no prosaic answer to the one query or to the other. And 'unloven you'; the phrase is one that a child might coin in momentary resentment at maternal reproof; and yet here we have the mystery of pure poetry, not to be explained on a theory of moral edification, or of musical enchantment, or of mystical suggestion. And similarly love's long-awaited fulfilment finds perfected utterance in that simple quatrain of Blake's, which seems to falter in its second line only to recover for a triumphant close:

Dost thou truly long for me
 And am I thus sweet to thee?
 Sorrow now is at an end
 O my lover and my friend!

This coincidence of words and meaning can only move us poetically through our sense of beauty. Keats was surely right in insisting that to the poet a sense of beauty obliterates all other considerations. That is not to say that his aim is mere smoothness or grace. Beauty is Protean in its shapes, and may reveal itself even in the grotesque, when it is prompted by a genuine poetic impulse. But in the names of originality, sincerity, progress, it needs must be that offences come; and the loose form and ungainly phrase too often betray a state of mind in which thought and feeling are not wholly fused, as true poetry demands. So it was at times with the metaphysicals, and with Browning; so it is often with our contemporaries. The result may be interesting, even exciting

to the intellect, but if we are to be moved poetically, we must be transported beyond that state to which cleverness makes any appeal. Browning gave us some brilliantly unpoetic verse, justifying it with the triumphant query 'Do roses stick like burrs?' To which it is no paradox to retort that roses stick far better. A burr may stick for the moment, and we are annoyed for the moment, but picking it off we cast it from us and forget all about it. But roses, even when they die, and poets roses do not die, 'live within the sense they quicken.' Only through beauty can the poet give permanent life to his creation.

And the value of poetry, from its lightest ebullition of fancy to its profoundest outcry of the spirit, lies simply in its power to communicate a sense of life in all its infinite variety and significance. The passion for life is the root instinct of our nature, and the poet differs from other men in that he has it more abundantly. It is this which inspires him to creative energy, and his creative power over language is itself the natural outcome of his intenser delight in life, and his keener sensitiveness to all its manifestations. His alertness to what is going on about him has often struck his more prosaic contemporary as something almost uncanny:

He took such cognizance of men and things
If any beat a horse you thought he saw,
If any cursed a woman he took note!
Yet stared at nobody, you stared at him,
And found, less to your pleasure than surprise,
He seemed to know you, and expect as much.

It is, moreover, by this quick response to the world of sense that the poet enters into the world of spirit; indeed, to the world of spirit there is no other entrance. To the true poet matter and spirit in the universe are no more separable than idea and expression are separable in his poetry. Hence the most ordinary incident, which we might pass by unnoticed,

may awaken in him thoughts and feelings which reach back to the inmost recesses of his being. Let him but have caught sight of a blind beggar in the street,

who with upright face
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
His story, whence he came and who he was.
Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
As with the might of waters; an apt type
This label seemed of the utmost we can know
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And on the shape of that unmoving man,
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed
As if admonished from another world;

or he reads, in a friend's diary, of a peasant girl singing at her work in the cornfield, and his imagination is set on fire:

No nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt
Among Arabian sands;
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In springtime from the Cuckoo bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Thus it is that the poet has

among least things
An undersense of greatest, sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling for the whole.

And if 'least things' can cast this spell upon him, those darker elements in life which loom so large in all human experience, its sorrow, disillusionment, despair, offer him a challenge from which he wrings his greatest triumphs. Poetic tragedy has its source and inspiration in a passionate conviction of the inherent worth of human life, a conviction which is roused all the more keenly by the spectacle of the havoc and waste wrought by evil; and that beauty which finds expres-

sion in the ordered scheme of the poem and in the melody and imagery of its verse is but the outward and visible sign of the temper in which the poet has viewed his subject and interpreted its significance. Hence, when his theme is tragic, he makes us feel it in a way that exalts rather than depresses. For his revelation is of

Sorrow that is not sorrow but delight,
And miserable love that is not pain
To hear of, for the glory that redounds
Therefrom to human kind, and what we are.

What wonder, then, since the whole of life comes within the poet's ken, and since in his creation he gives us his reading of life, that we should tend to regard him as a teacher? He is, in fact, the only effective teacher, for not only does he present to us what he conceives to be the truth, but he presents it, as few teachers can, in such a way that it is carried alive into the heart by passion. And though some sensitive artistic souls may think it blasphemy to call him a critic of life, the functions of criticism and creation being so widely diverse, he has assuredly been to thousands, whether or not they admit it, life's fullest, most convincing interpreter. So, indeed, many of the greatest poets have regarded themselves, and Coleridge well said that 'great men are only wrong by being imperfectly right'. Their error is, after all, only an error in emphasis, mistaking an inevitable element in poetry for its real spirit. For the *distinctive* function of poetry is not interpretation. A poet's philosophy of life wears no better than that of the professional philosopher; systems of thought soon go out of fashion, and even though the poet may see deeper than his time, in much that he says he is inevitably the creature of his time. But what his imagination has created has a life independent of those very theories which may have prompted its creation. The ideas which inspired Dante and Milton may be out of date; *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* retain

hold upon all who can read them poetically. Brown-Pippa convinces many who are not convinced that all's right with the world, and they can be stirred by the love of Pompilia and Caponsacchi without caring overmuch for the moral that the Pope drew from it. Indeed, Browning himself, who of all poets has been read with most unction by unpoetic readers, and whose art so often seems to invite prosaic comment, was under no delusion in the matter. The poet, he tells us, is not another Boehme with a tougher book and subtler meanings of what roses say, but is rather one who

With a 'look you!' vents a brace of rhymes,
And in there breaks the sudden rose itself,
Over us, under, round us every side,
Buries us with a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

Every artist, however trivial his theme, lifts the shadow from some tiny corner of the prison house that our dull insensibility has erected about us: the great masters illumine for us 'the darkest recesses of human experience. That profoundest of all attempts to justify the ways of God to man, *The Book of Job*, suggests, I think, in its tremendous climax, at once the supreme function of poetry and our supreme need for it. To the fervid appeals of his outraged reason Job obtains no response, and when at last an answer is vouchsafed him argument is not met by argument, it is transcended in a vision, a vision of the beauty and splendour of the universe and of the infinite power of God. And Job's last words transport us into that world of our desire, beyond the reach of reason, in which poetry and religion are one:

I had heard of thee with the hearing of the ear;
But now, mine eye seeth thee.

Vision, not interpretation, that is poetry. Only incidentally does the poet teach. But by the creative power of his imagination, which gives to his passionate experience 'the vital spirit

of a perfect form', he reveals to us the wonder of the natural world, the joys and the sorrows, the exultations and agonies of man's unconquerable mind, so that we are awakened for a time from our torpor, and seeing things with the poet's eyes, see into their life. And when the vision fades, we are left with something of that serene sense of fulfilment which was Dante's at the close of his sublime pilgrimage:

quasi tutta cessa
Mia visione, ed ancor mi distilla
Nel cor lo dolce che nacque da essa.

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